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C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (PARA 5)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/09/2017
TAGS: PGOV KDEM VE
SUBJECT: CHAVISTAS USE RECALL REFERENDA TO SETTLE SCORES

REF: A. CARACAS 00805
1B. CARACAS 00820 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT DOWNES FOR 1.4 (D)

11. (C) Summary: In late 2006, most of Venezuela's governors, mayors, and local legislators completed the mid-point of their term, at which point they became vulnerable to being recalled. The National Electoral Council has approved requests to initiate recall proceedings against more than 200 mostly Chavista officials, and in mid-June will formally collect signatures from those favoring a recall vote. If enough signatures are collected, a referendum will be held by early October. Most of the requests appear to be driven by local intra-Chavista rivalries, and are unlikely to succeed without Chavez' backing. The exceptions are those in Aragua and Sucre states, where President Chavez has publicly endorsed efforts to remove pro-government governors in response to their public criticisms of his single revolutionary party proposal. End Summary.

Chavistas Seek to Recall Their Own

12. (U) Venezuelan law permits the recall of elected officials through a petition and referendum process once they complete the mid-point of their terms (Ref A). For most state and local officials, including governors, mayors, state legislators, and council members, the mid-point occurred on October 31, 2006. The National Electoral Council (CNE) has approved requests to initiate recall petitions against more than 200 mostly pro-Chavez officials and has announced a three-day drive for June 16-18 to collect signatures for a recall. If at least 20 percent of the electorate in the particular voting district sign the petitions, the CNE will then convoke a recall vote, probably by early October.

For an official to be recalled:

-- 25 percent of the electorate in the voting district must participate;
-- more people must vote for recall than against it; and,
-- the number of those voting in favor of the recall must equal or exceed the number of votes the official received when elected.

13. (U) A total of twelve governors, over 100 mayors, and various local legislators are on the recall list. Among the more notable Chavistas are Chavez crony and Miranda state Governor Diosdado Cabello, the formerly described "Scribe of the Revolution" and Anzoategui Governor Tarek William Saab,

Carabobo state Governor Luis Acosta Carlez, and Caracas Libertador municipality Mayor Freddy Bernal. Chavez' cousin Mayor Ramon Frias (Arismendi, Barinas state) and ex-Vice President Rangel's son and Sucre municipality Mayor Jose Vicente Rangel Avalos are on the list as well. So far, the most notable opposition figure on the list is Baruta Mayor Henrique Capriles Radonski. Despite initial speculation, Zulia Governor and national opposition leader Manuel Rosales is not on the list of potential recall victims.

Revenge or Accountability?

¶4. (C) The recall efforts against Aragua and Sucre state Governors Didalco Bolivar and Ramon Martinez (both Podemos party leaders), respectively, appear to be clear cases of political retaliation for their and Podemos' public criticism of and refusal to join Chavez' United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV, Ref B). Recalls were approved against both governors within days of their public objections to joining the PSUV, and Chavez subsequently publicly rebuked them and called on his followers to "revoke them both." Aragua state has the highest percentage of recall petitions, which if successful, would result in the ouster of the governor, all but two mayors, and the entire legislative council, and would likely trigger new state-wide elections.

¶5. (C) The recall effort in Aragua state could be "the fight to watch" as Bolivar, three-time governor of the state, was well entrenched in Aragua long before Chavez. Many observers, noting his popularity, believe it unlikely that he would lose in a fair vote. Martinez, who is also Podemos' president, has a similar background, and by all accounts is digging in for a major fight. However, he has recently been plagued by accusations of corruption, and may have problems defeating a government-supported recall.

¶6. (C) Most of the other recall efforts appear to be driven by personal rivalries or vendettas. For example:

--Anzoategui state: Former Chavista Foreign Minister Luis Alfonso Davila and his Progressive Anzoateguians Opinion Group is pushing the recall effort against Governor Tarek William Saab (Fifth Republic Movement, MVR). Saab was Chavez' imposed candidate for governor in 2004, causing friction with local MVR officials from the start of his governorship. His main rivals have been the pro-Chavez mayors of the state's main cities Barcelona (the capital) and Puerto La Cruz. His popularity has steadily declined in the past few years, but Chavez has expressed confidence in Saab's ability to overcome the current challenge.

--Bolivar state: According to opposition insider Anibal Sanchez, the attempt to recall Governor Francisco Rangel Gomez (MVR) is one of the few that could succeed. Rangel Gomez is reportedly opposed by all of the state's mayors because he has not shared kickbacks from infrastructure projects.

--Monagas state: The recall request against Governor Jose Gregorio "Gato" Briceno (Migato, or The Independent "We All Win" Movement) was sponsored by the governor's long-time rival, Maturin Mayor Numa Rojas (MVR). In retaliation, Briceno has brought one against Rojas, too. Local MVR representatives, including the state's National Assembly representatives, are reportedly trying to negotiate a truce between the officials by which both sides would drop their recall efforts.

--Carabobo state: Governor Luis Acosta Carlez has been a divisive figure within the Carabobo state chapter of the MVR. Things came to a head in 2005 when the MVR's national committee had to intervene in the local branch to restore order. The party has investigated several of Carlez' aides for corruption as well. The recall is sponsored by the head of the pro-Chavez journalist group, Periodistas Por la Verdad (Journalists for the Truth), but former National Assembly

member for Carabobo Pedro Diaz Blum says it is not supported by the local MVR chapter and will therefore not succeed.

--Zulia state: Pro-opposition San Francisco Mayor Saadi Bijani (Copei) told the Ambassador that he thinks the central government is pursuing the recall effort against him over the objections of local MVR leaders. Neither it, nor the effort against pro-Chavez Maracaibo Mayor Gian Carlo DiMartino (MVR), is expected to prosper, however. Meanwhile, Governor Rosales (Un Nuevo Tiempo, UNT) is trying to encourage a recall against himself to reaffirm his popularity in the state. (Note: Rosales suffered his first electoral defeat in Zulia during the 2006 presidential election, narrowly losing the state to Chavez 51-48, but retains significant popularity in the state.)

--Caracas, Libertador municipality: Mayor Freddy Bernal (MVR) has long fought with Caracas Metropolitan Mayor Juan Barreto (MVR), most recently about the year in which Caracas was founded, and a faction of the latter's supporters may be behind this recall effort. Bernal is supported by the local legislative council, and his close ties to President Chavez will help him stave off revocation.

--Baruta municipality: Though not likely to be removed, many opposition supporters are disappointed with Mayor Henrique Capriles Radonski's (PJ) administration. While pro-government supporters are most likely behind the effort, opposition insider Anibal Sanchez said opposition members may participate to informally censure Capriles, who is often described as arrogant and unwilling to cooperate with other opposition groups.

¶7. (C) The BRV may see advantages to allowing some recalls to succeed, such as:

--Sucre municipality: According to an opposition contact, Chavistas might allow the Mayor Jose Vicente Rangel Avalos (MVR) to be recalled because of reported widespread discontent with his administration.

--Yaracuy state: Governor Carlos Gimenez (formerly Podemos, now PSUV) has occasionally clashed with the MVR's Yaracuy leaders in the past because of his perceived efforts to strengthen his former party's standing at the expense of the MVR. While we cannot identify for certain the motivations for this recall, it is one of the few that, if successful, would allow Chavistas to say they are fighting corruption. Gimenez was summoned to appear before the National Assembly's Oversight Committee May 2 to answer allegations of malfeasance in relation to concessions of government contracts.

Chavista Reaction: Indignant to Prepared

¶8. (C) Many Chavista officials on the list have reacted with indignation to their potential recall, accusing the petitioning groups of being "counterrevolutionaries" seeking to betray or undermine the "revolution." Others have said they welcome the chance to defend their administration. Some officials, such as Rangel Gomez and Bernal, have announced the establishment of campaign teams similar to the Maisanta and Miranda structures Chavez used in his recall and re-election campaigns, respectively. Chavez told targeted officials during a recent "Alo Presidente" show to follow his example in 2004 and "demonstrate the effectiveness of their administration." If they are recalled, he said they simply "have to go." He even "invited" voters to convoke a recall vote against his father, Barinas state Governor Hugo Chavez de los Reyes, to try to demonstrate that no one is or should be immune (in theory).

Opposition Maintains Distance

¶9. (C) While they are enjoying the Chavista infighting, most opposition leaders see the recalls as an attempt to distract from the BRV's serious administrative problems and/or potentially controversial projects in the pipeline. Most doubt the recalls will succeed without Chavez' backing. UNT and Proyecto Venezuela leaders say their parties will not join the signature drives, partly out of concern that their anti-Chavez signatures would be added to the BRV's computerized "Tascon List," which identifies friends and foes of Chavismo. However, it is possible that they might quietly encourage their supporters to participate in an actual recall vote.

¶10. (C) The opposition also probably sees little incentive to enter the referendum fray. Most opposition supporters still strongly distrust the Chavista-stacked CNE, suffer from electoral fatigue, and are therefore unlikely to respond to a get-out-the-vote campaign. A recall vote, if held, would be the eleventh electoral event in ten years. The opposition has lost every one. Also, Venezuelan law states that if the recall succeeds, the incumbent is replaced by someone from within the government, which means that even if a Chavista is recalled, they would be trading one pro-Chavez official for another. On the other hand, if the recall fails, the incumbent will be strengthened in the run-up to the next regional election, which is scheduled for 2008. At a time when the opposition has been forced to focus on rebuilding their ranks, gearing up for a recall vote this year distracts from ongoing attempts to develop local leaders for next year's race and risks demoralizing newly-energized supporters in the event of a loss.

Comment

¶11. (C) The multiple recall referenda efforts once again show the fractious nature of Chavismo and may foreshadow the difficulties Chavez could face in maintaining a single pro-government "revolutionary" party. Chavez may allow some recalls to succeed to drop under-performers, punish perceived disloyalty, and maintain a pretense of democracy. However, a serious weakening of the Chavista movement as a result of the recall process is unlikely, as Chavez' supporters, even those in high level positions, would probably be unwilling to cross the Venezuelan president and revoke someone perceived to be close to him. Moreover, if there were even a remote chance of surprises, the Chavez-controlled CNE could easily prevent them through manipulation of the rules or the results.

WHITAKER